

2017 High School Essay Contest



Deadline: January 31, 2017
Theme: Aesthetics
Submit online at plato-philosophy.org

ESSAY QUESTION:

How do we define art or determine what things count as art objects?

All winning essays will be published in *Questions*, PLATO's official journal.
Learn more about the journal here: <http://www.plato-philosophy.org/journal-questions>

CASE:

Sarah and Mike, two friends who met in an art class, spend the afternoon in MassMoCA, a museum in North Adams, MA, that features installations of contemporary art that are sometimes very large and often unusual.

In one gallery, they stop to look at a pile of sticks placed in a corner. In another, they watch an endlessly looping video of a person sitting in a chair. They aren't sure what to make of these exhibits.

Finally, in one of the museum's wings, they find a variety of large, colorful abstract shapes drawn right on the walls. "Now this looks like art!" they say to each other. The artist's name is Sol LeWitt. But when they read more about him and his work, they learn that the shapes on the wall weren't actually painted by LeWitt. Instead, his assistants painted them according to his very detailed written instructions.

"This stuff isn't really art," Mike says. "It's all a scam!"

Sarah isn't so sure. "Well," she says, "it's in the museum, which means someone decided it should be here. So it must be art."

"Look at that pile of sticks in the corner," Mike says. "That's something anyone could do. I could do that!"

"But you *didn't* do it," Sarah says, "the artist did. Someone deliberately chose to position the sticks just that way."

“Shouldn’t art be beautiful?” Mike asks.

“Does all art have to be?” Sarah asks. As they walk through the gallery continuing their discussion, they notice a fire extinguisher on the wall.

“Is that art too?” Mike asks, pointing to the object. “Is it part of the exhibit? Or is it just something to put out fires? And how can we tell?”

Directions

Write an essay that provides a reasoned, sincere and well-supported argument in response to the question, drawing on the case. Give your essay a title, number your pages, and proof-read it carefully.

Your essay should advance reasons to help support your own conclusions about the question. The best essays will not simply summarize arguments put forth by others or make assertions, but will ask questions and make claims based on evidence and considered reflection. Strive to be consistent in your reasoning by testing your position against challenges presented by arguments that oppose your own point of view.

We do not require you to cite other sources, though you may. The texts listed below can be a source of information, but they can also be used to spur inquiry. If you decide to quote from the text, be sure to interpret the passage in your own words. Explain what you understand the philosopher to be saying and why what he or she is saying is important for your argument. For example, the philosopher's position might support, complicate or challenge your own response to the question.

Helpful Resources:

Here are three online philosophy resources about art that may prove helpful:

- <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/art-definition/>
- <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aestheti/#H6>

Essay Format:

The first page of the entry should be a cover page that includes a one-paragraph bio, your name, contact information (phone and email), grade and school. The essay should begin on page 2 (please make sure your name is not listed on the pages containing the essay). Your essay should be saved as a word document (.doc or .docx) and submitted here, on our website.

Essay Length: 2,000 words maximum

If you use outside references, list them at the end of the essay using the citation style above (MLA style). For notes within the essay, use author’s name and page, e.g. (Kant, p. 222). Please do not use Wikipedia or dictionary definitions in your essay.